American Friends Service Committee
New York Metropolitan Regional Office

OUR CHILDREN'S HOUSE

INTERVIEWS WITH YOUTH ON THEIR EXPERIENCES WITH JUVENILE DETENTION

The child shall enjoy special protection, and shall be given opportunities and facilities, by law and by other means, to enable him to develop physically, mentally, morally, spiritually and socially in a healthy and normal manner and in conditions of freedom and dignity.

1959 United Nations Declaration of the Rights of the Child
N.N.
I saw plenty of girls cry there...

The medical was bad. Say if we got a toothache or stomachache, the nurse will come up next week. They didn't believe us. They thought we just wanted to get out of the big room.

There is no freedom in a place like that. I like to be with my family. They tell you what time to shower, what time to eat. I stay away from people who get into trouble now. I walk away. Only my sister is there for me. I got a plan. I plan on finishing school, getting my own apartment. I'll work. I want to go to school to be a nurse. I can't do math though. I don't do good in math. I know I don't want to get locked up anymore.

* To see the complete testimonies of these children, please contact Bonnie Kerness at 973-643-3192.

References

Nolte, Dorothy Law, PhD. Children Learn What They Live. 1972


OUR CHILDREN'S HOUSE

Between June 2000 and August 2001, the American Friends Service Committee listened to the stories of eleven young people, ages fifteen to twenty, who had been detained in the Essex County Youth Detention Facility in Newark, New Jersey. This listening project was an outgrowth of the AFSC's New Directions Youth Project, a mentorship program with young people who had had a first time brush with the law.

We were unprepared for the young people's reactions as they spoke. Many cried. Many expressed such fear of retaliation that they would not allow us to use their names. We have testimonies about the use of pepper spray, beatings by guards, inappropriate use of psychotropic drugs, isolation for long periods, and sexual abuse. The children described racism, guard-provoked fighting, cold, filthy and other forms of brutality. We heard stories of enduring experiences, sights, smells and sounds that are inappropriate for anyone, let alone a child. Certain themes became clear, and we organized excerpts from their testimonies to reflect these painful themes and to expose the common issues faced by young people in prison.

The New Jersey Juvenile Justice Commission confirmed these conditions, and concluded in its 2001 report that "these practices...contradict every accepted standard of professional practice in the field of juvenile detention and unduly threaten the safety and well being of the staff and juveniles in the Essex County Juvenile Detention Center."

Across the United States children are often held in facilities that are seriously overcrowded and cannot provide essential educational, mental health and other services. Trends in juvenile justice policy and practice in the United States violate a number of United Nations conventions to which the U.S. is a signatory, including the UN Convention Against Torture, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the International Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Reports from Human Rights Watch and the World Organization Against Torture confirm gross violations in U.S. juvenile imprisonment policies. Children of color are over-represented at all levels of the juvenile justice system.

An old poem tells us that children learn what they live. If they live with hostility, they learn violence. These eleven children speak the language of violence taught by adults. Many of these children were incarcerated when other action could have been taken.

Although it was the young people that were detained for behavior considered criminal, the testimonies that follow reveal the image of lawlessness in those adults who were meant to represent justice.

Bonnie Kerness
American Friends Service Committee
February 25, 2002
The kids come out of the youth house institutionalized. They're out of the youth house and living conditions, stories, and reflections

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DD.
One time I remember this boy who didn’t believe in God. The guard said that he was “refusing,” so he grabbed his arm and bent it behind his back. Then he pushed his arm against the kid’s throat to choke him. He made him go to church. After that they threw him in the MCU.

J.R.
Even the bigger kids didn’t want to go into our unit. The kids are always going off in there. Every day there are fights—between the guards and the kids or the kids and other kids. I was the smallest kid in there and was picked on the most. I held my own. I had to fight the kids and the COs [correctional officers]. They put me in isolation for two days for both fights.

One time there were two kids brought in for rape charges. We asked the guard for keys to their room. We went into their room, threw the keys out under the door, and locked ourselves in their room. We beat them up. The guards knew all about it.

If you don’t take care of yourself, the guards don’t care. I’ve blocked a lot of memories out. One day they opened up all the cells. All the black kids went up to a Puerto Rican kid and beat him. The guards never reported it. Up there you see black with black, and Puerto Rican with Puerto Rican. Everybody got their own.

I remember younger kids getting raped by bigger kids.

The only thing that experience left me with is to not shut up for nobody. If someone goes off on me, I’ll go off on them. Either you are going to talk or you are going to fight. The people who talk usually get beat up. I was there 29 days. I swear it seemed like two or three months.

T.H.
It has a school, which is okay except for gym where people want to fight. You have to hold your own and fight just so people leave you alone. The guards let you fight. If two niggers want to brawl out, they brawl out. I think that’s a good solution because if kids want to fight, they are going to.

They put this one young dude by himself. He’d scream and kick on his cell door and keep everyone up. The kids jumped him when they let him out of the cell because he kept them up.

We were on lockdown every night. A guy started to yell, kick and throw wet tissues out of his cell whenever it was time to go to sleep. A regular CO told him to cut it out and the kid was crying. The CO said he was waking everyone up. When he wouldn’t be quiet, the SERT team [Special Emergency Response Team] came in and beat his ass. He went down to the nurse and when he came up he was quiet. They beat him bad. They went in there with clubs. One didn’t have a club, but he was punching him.

N.N.
People there will say something smart to another person to get them mad. If you don’t get a visit, they mess with you. One time my sister came to visit. One of the girls came up on me and said something smart. I started to swing at her. Am I supposed to do nothing? They wanted to put me in lockdown for a week.

ABUSE OF POWER

B.F. age 17
They used pepper spray on this girl who was fighting one time. They sprayed her directly in her mouth and she couldn’t breathe. They kept hitting her. We kept telling them that she had asthma, but they wouldn’t listen.

The male guards being with the females. Guards were bringing in weed and cigarettes for the kids. I remember one bringing a girl he was having sex with cigarettes. She hid them in her radio. She got caught and they asked her who gave it to her. When she told, he spit on her. She filed charges later on and nothing happened.

Guards call you names. If they don’t physically abuse you, they mentally abuse you. They call you punk, pussy, turd, wimp—trying to get you mad. This one guard was calling me names and I didn’t even know what they meant.

J.B. age 20
Guards knew they couldn’t beat us so they had kids beat other kids up. They would give out cigarettes or weed as a reward. Guards used drugs and used to come in high. If kids went to the superintendent to report, they were told to shut up. Guards had mothers do sexual favors if they wanted to get their kids something special.

D.D. age 15
If the guards don’t like you, they will set you up or let you get into a fight. Then they’ll call a "code red," which is a riot. We went on a chain gang to go to court and this guard deliberately put the cuffs on me wrong. My hands swelled up really bad. Another guard saw it and took them off and put them on right.

If they do like you, you can get extra snacks at night. In the older units you can do more stuff, but the consequences are worse.

You can be coming down the hallway, and they will purposely push you into, trying to provoke or hurt you. I once saw a kid fall all the way down the stairs because he messed. I saw the kids bleeding and watched the guard deliberately take his time getting to him. Even if you keep to yourself, they’ll still mess with you. There is no way to avoid things.

I knew a kid who went to Jamesburg [A state youth detention center]. He told me that the guards there hit you and beat you with nightsticks. They put him in a choke hold until he was unconscious.

The cops are racist. Even the black ones. They stop nine and ten year olds in my neighborhood. They throw them in a car and hand cuff them. Then they take them to a different neighborhood and drop you off. All for no reason. If they don’t like you, they actually put drugs on you. They have a new charge now. It’s called “wandering.” Can you believe that? Getting charged for “wandering?”

J.R. age 18
Some kids get treated better than other kids. The guards will give them cigarettes or liquor. I don’t know how they did it. Maybe they knew someone.

One time my cellmate didn’t want to shower. The guards threw a bucket of water on him and all over the room. Then they put him in the shower and wanted me to clean up the water. I went off on him. [i.e. lost his temper] They just let us do whatever we wanted.
Violence

Voilence is a social issue that needs to be addressed, especially in today's world. It is an issue that affects many communities globally, and its impact on individuals and societies cannot be underestimated. Violence can take various forms, including physical, emotional, and verbal abuse. It is essential to understand the root causes of violence and develop strategies to address them effectively.

Lockdown

Lockdown is a term used to describe a situation where individuals are required to remain in their homes or at designated locations for a specific period. It is often implemented due to public health emergencies or other unforeseen circumstances. Lockdowns can have significant impacts on individuals, communities, and economies. They require careful planning and implementation to ensure their effectiveness while minimizing their negative consequences.